

Baton Rouge, LA – The Advocate

Author encourages graduates



DAS Sean Hamilton, Director of Education Kim Mims and Jetson Director Daron Brown congratulate graduate Donald Y. Principal Ronnie Knox is on the right.



Award-winning Louisiana author Ernest Gaines speaks to a group of Jetson Center for Youth inmates during a program Friday where they were recognized for recently earning their equivalency diplomas.

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BAKER — World-renowned Louisiana author Ernest Gaines encouraged a group of graduates at Jetson Center for Youth to continue their education.

“This day is the beginning of your life,” Gaines said. “You can pick whatever direction you want to take.”

Gaines, 78, made his comments Friday at a graduation ceremony held inside a gymnasium at the center.

A dozen young men were honored at the ceremony for passing the General Educational Development test.

Three other youths were presented with the Ernest Gaines award, which honors improved reading skills.

"Reading set me free," Gaines said after the ceremony. "It can set them (the young men at the ceremony) free too."

Gaines, who lives in Oscar on part of the old plantation where he grew up, said he became an avid reader at a young age because his stepfather forced him off the streets and into public libraries.

It was the reading Gaines said he did in those libraries that inspired him to become a writer.

Since then, Gaines has written several novels and short stories, all of which have been taught in college classrooms and translated into several languages.

Gaines, who has taught at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, is retired but working on another book, he said.

"A Lesson Before Dying," his 1993 novel about a man on death row, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction.

A group of young men staying in state Office of Juvenile Justice facilities recently read Gaines' 1978 novel, "In My Father's House."

Some of those youths got to meet Gaines on Friday. Huddled around his large frame, the youths asked Gaines about his life as an author.

One youth asked Gaines to describe himself after becoming a successful writer. Gaines told the young man that reading and writing opened his heart and mind and made him a more loving, compassionate person.

Jetson inmate, Donald, 17, said earning his GED has done the same for him.

The experience has inspired Donald to go to college and become a civil engineer, he said.

"I'm really excited," Donald said. "I'm really glad I got my GED."

Donald's mother, Linda Young, said she too is glad her son got his GED.

"I never thought he would make it this far," she said. "I hope he doesn't give up."

East Baton Rouge Parish District Attorney Hillar Moore III also spoke at Friday's ceremony.

Moore told his audience that education is the best way to break the cycle of crime.

"You have broken that cycle," Moore told the graduates. "By graduating today, each of you has opened up a personal door to success